

II Kings 2:15-25; James 5:13-20; Elisha Blessing and Cursing I. Jericho Becomes a Place of Healing II. Bethel Becomes a Place of Pain

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who do we respect and why? Our world respects those who are powerful or influential, while the world mocks those who fail to step in line and follow the crowds. So who do people tend to respect? Did you know that doctors, pharmacists, police officers, high school teachers and accountants all rank as more trustworthy than pastors in our society? There really is a crisis of confidence in the churches of our country. People have been abused and led astray by far too many leaders of the church. That can lead to a skepticism- even derision heaped upon church leaders. In many ways, our passage today is about respect and derision- who honors and who ridicules the LORD'S servant. In our text, we find two miracles that prove or serve to authenticate Elisha's identity. As a servant of the LORD- the bringing of God's Word- Elisha is called upon to bless and to curse. To bless those who bless the LORD- and curse those who ridicule the LORD. And in these first miracles, we catch a glimpse of what Elisha's ministry will be like. Just as we do in the book of John with Jesus' first miracle- turning water into wine indicates that Jesus' ministry will bring the blessings of the covenant- as the wine of gladness will flow at the wedding supper to come. So in our reading for today we have two cities- two separate kinds of people that represent these cities. Both of these cities were found earlier in this chapter- Jericho is found in 2:4 and Bethel in 2:2. But what kind of people come from these cities today? This morning we consider this theme: Jesus Christ reveals God's blessing and curses as Elisha begins his ministry in Israel.

### **I. Jericho Becomes a Place of Healing**

In our first point, we find that Jericho becomes a place of healing. Now Jericho is one of those cities that we hear a lot about. Every child here knows the story of Joshua and Jericho- where the walls come tumbling down. Jericho was the gateway to the promised land- and as a city- she was the first to taste God's justice as the Israelites possessed the promised land. This city was located near the Dead Sea- and there was a lot of salt in the area- but it was also an oasis- a place where good water produced plenty of palm trees. Even today, there is a thriving citrus orchard in this area. But in the book of Joshua, this city was a fortress that needed to fall. The walls become a heap and God pronounces a curse upon it- cursed be the man who rebuilds this city. We saw this curse

fall on Heil back in I Kings 16. Interestingly, Heil was from Bethel- the 2<sup>nd</sup> city in our text- and he rebuilt Jericho at the cost of his oldest and youngest son. So Jericho had become a place of destruction and death- where the old ways die- a sign of God's victory over the foes. But we find a different picture in our text today. We find that Jericho is a pleasant place in v. 19- in a beautiful location. But there is one major problem, the water is bad. Now we do not know how or why this water was bad- it was polluted or poisonous in some way. The land suffered and the animals groaned- it was unproductive- a place a death. But the residents of Jericho act in faith and obedience- they go to seek the aid of the LORD! They make a good request- seeking help from the LORD'S servant- they ask Elisha for aid! They do not go to the Baal Zebub the god of Ekron as their former king did- they seek help from the man of God! This is a sign of respect- and an act of faith. Elijah has just been taken away- Elisha is the new prophet of the LORD- and the men of this city rightly ask for God's blessing from the LORD's servant. To put this in today's context, it would be like asking the elders of the church to pray for your healing and health as we read in James 5:14- that the leaders of the church intercede to God on your behalf. It is a sign of respect to the elders- but also an act of faith- because you are asking God for aid- looking to Him and none other for help! So Elisha goes with them and he takes a new bowl- which was a sign of ritual cleansing- and fills this bowl with salt. Now salt is a substance rich in symbolism. Salt was used as a sign of the covenant- all of the incense and sacrifices made to the LORD were to include salt as Lev. 2:13 puts it, you shall season all your grain offerings with salt. Let not the salt of the covenant be missing from your offerings! So salt comes to represent the sacrifices and offerings of the covenant- as well as the necessary cleansing. It speaks of purity and preservation. We even find this in the NT don't we- we are called to be the salt of the earth- to let our words be gracious and seasoned with salt as we heard last week. So this bowl full of salt is thrown into the spring as a sign and symbol of the LORD'S work. A bowl full of salt cannot heal a fountain of water- but Elisha pronounces in v. 21- the LORD has healed this water! Bad water can be healed! The healing is from the LORD- and the death and pollution is taken away from the land. No more will the crops die and the animals miscarriage- this water is being made good and beneficial. In this, God is restoring, refreshing and giving life. Bad water is made into good, healing water the restores! By this miracle, Elisha is anticipating one aspect of Jesus' ministry. Specifically, when

Jesus returns on that last day, He will restore order to this world. The New Earth will be made into a place of plenty and blessings. Even as Rev. 22:1 puts it, a river of life will flow from the throne bringing life and refreshment to all who drink! So we catch a little glimpse of this today in our text- the land that was crying out in the labor pain of bondage find a little taste of freedom! The crops will grow abundantly and the animals will skip with joy- because miscarriage and death has been removed because the waters have been healed! So the first group of people- the men of Jericho- wisely ask the LORD for aid and Elisha is used to bring healing and life to the land! It is wise to ask God for aid- to trust in Him and to look to His hand- to call upon Him in your times of trouble! But the second group of people in our text are fools- instead of honoring God's servant and trusting the LORD they mock and ridicule. Prov. 13:14, the teaching of the wise is a fountain of life. Who you trust in has consequences- whom you call upon makes all the difference in the world! Those who call upon the LORD- who look to His hand for life and healing will be restored! But those who shun the LORD will suffer want!

## **II. Bethel Becomes a Place of Pain**

So we come to the second city- the city of Bethel in v. 23. Bethel becomes a place of pain! Now Bethel is also a city rich in OT history. It was at Bethel- named the House of the LORD- where Jacob saw the ladder between heaven and earth in Genesis 28. So it was here that a link between heaven and earth was seen- where angels travel from heaven to earth. But Bethel has a darker history as well. Bethel was one of the chosen locations where King Jeroboam decided to locate one of his golden calves. So Bethel becomes the house of a golden calf and begins to represent false worship and idolatry. Here as Elisha walks by, he is met by another group of people. This time, we have around 50 youths- which mean that they were under 20 years old. These young men could easily be of military age. This group of boys come out to meet Elisha and begin to mock him and his appearance. Go up, you bald head- they chant and jeer in v. 23. Go up where? Well, going up is the normal direction of a prophet- as the high places were normally located at the top of mountains. So this group of youths was telling Elisha to go up the mountain- mockingly speaking about his work. They mock, scorn or make fun of him. Children, it would be like poking fun of how a person looked- jeering and laughing at them because of their

appearance. They also call him a bald head. Now baldness was a sign of age and wisdom- and later on a shaved head would come to signify someone who was dedicated to the LORD for service- so this could have been another ridicule of Elisha's calling as a prophet. But added to this fact, shaving your head was normally a sign of sorrow. When a close member of your family died, it was common for an Israelite to shave their head in sorrow. So you would shave your head in sorrow. Perhaps Elisha had shaved his head in sorrow because Elijah had been taken away- not only tearing his cloths as we saw back in 2:12, but also shaving his head in sorrow as well. Either way, to call a person a bald head was something you would only do in mocking scorn. Making fun of a person's appearance- and scornfully deriding a prophet for how he looks. That is what this group of boys do. Hearing their chant, Elisha turns around and curses them in the name of the LORD. It seems that this group of young ones have embraced the idolatry of the golden calf as they slander the name of the LORD and His prophet. The mocker- someone who ridicules others- is often condemned in Scripture. The Blessed man does not sit in the seat of scoffers as Psalm 1 opens. Or Prov. 13:1, a scoffer does not listen to his father's rebuke. Those who mock fellow man are in fact ridiculing those whom God has made in his image. As we saw last week with the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment, we must not be like those who tear down others with our words. Listen to what James 3 says, out of the same mouth must not come blessings and curses, for a spring cannot produce both fresh and salt water. But these young men- or boys- out of the pollution in their hearts allowed their mouths to speak. Mocking the LORD's Servant and deriving His work. So they are under God's curse. Notice that although Elisha curses them- he does not call for the bears to come. Elijah had back in II Kings 1 called for the fire of God to fall on the rude military captain and his men, but Elisha only curses them in the LORD's name. The LORD rebuke you! And the LORD does rebuke them by sending two female bears into their midst. Bears come out of the woods and attack these boys who mocked the LORD'S anointed one. We read that 42 of them were injured- tore up and cut to pieces. Not that they all necessarily died, but the bears do maul this group. They are severely injured- that is how serious the LORD takes the sin of mockery. On the flip side, God's people are called to honor and respect their leaders. Applying this today, we are called to respect and revere those God has placed over us. As Heb. 13:17, obey your leaders and submit to them for they are keeping watch over your souls. Or as Rom. 13 put it, be

subject to the governing authority. Fear God and honor the king Peter says. God's people are to be know by their respect of their leaders who they honor for the sake of their office unlike these youths who mocked Elisha for being a man of God.

As I said before, Elisha is many ways, points directly the ministry of Jesus Christ. Did you know that Christ, Himself, was ridiculed for the sake of His office? His foes slandered his name- specifically His claim to be the Christ. Listen to what His foes said in Mt. 26- since you are a prophet, who struck you? Prophecy to us! Or in Mt. 27 as they pressed the crown of thorns upon his head and knelt before him- hail King Jesus as they struck him on the head with the staff. He saved others, let him save himself. If he is the Christ, let him come down from the cross and we will believe in him. So Christ's enemies mocked him as these kids mocked Elisha. But as these kids found out, Christ's enemies will find out as well, that God does not take lightly to those who ridicule His anointed servant. On the last day when Christ returns, the wicked mockers will not be cut up and mauled by bears, but they will be cut to pieces by the sword of God's justice! Contempt for God's prophet will be met with a disastrous end! As the parable of the Tenants in Mark 12 proves, when the master of the house returns He will destroy those who rejected His messengers! That is a warning to us all, how we respond to God's representatives has serious consequences!

To conclude, the contrast in our passage is striking. Two cities, two groups of people and two very different receptions. In one place, Elisha is revered and his help requested. These find blessing, healing and peace from the LORD'S hand. In another place, Elisha is mocked and ridiculed. These receive the swift justice of the LORD as His anger is poured out. These are pictures of what is to come- portents of the future. Jesus Christ reveals God's blessing and curses as Elisha begins his ministry in Israel. Will you be granted access to the water of life, or will you be cut to pieces and suffer great pain? Well, it depends on how you receive the LORD'S servant? How do you respond to the perfect prophet, Christ? If you call upon Him and seek His help for your aid, you will be blessed with healing water where there is no death or loss- only plenty and peace for all eternity!